"Half God, half man": Kazantzakis, Scorsese, and *The Last Temptation*

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> You may have heard of the Blessed Mountain.
> It is the highest mountain in our world.
> Should you reach the summit you would have only one desire,
> and that to descend and be with those who dwell in the deepest valley.
> That is why it is called the Blessed Mountain.
> Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam*[1]

Two Natures

In the "Prologue" to his novel *The Last Temptation* (1954), Nikos Kazantzakis identified his central and abiding theme as "The dual substance of Christ":

> The yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain to God, or more exactly, to return to God and identify himself with him—has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. . . . My principal anguish, and the wellspring of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh.[2]

Speaking of his film version of the novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Martin Scorsese echoed this formulation:

[1] Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam: A Book of Aphorisms* (New York: Knopf, 1926) 85. I am very grateful to Father Kevin Morris and to *HTR* readers for invaluable help with this essay.

[2] Nikos Kazantzakis, "Prologue," *The Last Temptation* (trans. Peter Bien; Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1961; repr., London: Faber & Faber, 1975) 7. This passage appears in much the same form in Kazantzakis's autobiographical work *Report to Greco* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1965; repr., London: Faber & Faber, 1973) 290–92.

HTR 100:1 (2007) 65–96

> Kazantzakis took the two natures of Jesus . . . this was Christologically correct: the debate goes back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when they discussed how much of Jesus was divine, how much human.[3]

Both novelist and film director explicitly took their bearings from those ancient theological terms, "dual substance" and "dual nature," of the early church councils. The Council of Nicaea (325) declared that Christ was "consubstantial with the Father" (ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί) and yet "became human" and "incarnate"; the Council of Chalcedon (451) affirmed the dual nature of the Son: "our Lord Jesus Christ . . . truly God and truly man . . . consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity."[4] This remained the orthodox formulation, as embodied in the Athanasian Creed: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is equally both God and Man."[5]

Both Kazantzakis and Scorsese thus located their work at the heart of Christianity's most complex internal controversy, the relation between divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. Implicit in the gospels ("the Word became flesh," John 1:14) and explicit in the Pauline epistles ("God was revealed in the flesh," 1 Tim 3:16), the dual nature, or dual substance, of Christ has always been, and still remains, an intellectually challenging, doctrinally controversial but nonetheless unavoidable cornerstone of Christian belief and worship.

Although both novelist and director were brought up in religious communities and had good religious educations, neither was a professional or academic theologian. They both tended to think, for example, in a dualistic rather than a Trinitarian way and neither had anything to say in this context about the origin or operation of the Holy Spirit. Both engaged creatively with the central problem of the dual nature of Christ and produced fictional works pervaded by complex and profound explorations of Christology. This paper will explore the theological underpinnings of both versions of *The Last Temptation* and attempt to demonstrate the value of their contributions to theological discussion and debate.

Incarnation

For Nikos Kazantzakis, Jesus was both truly man and truly God, and the novelist set himself the task of finding some means of representing this unique being within the boundaries of prose fiction:

[3] *Scorsese on Scorsese* (ed. David Thompson and Ian Christie; London: Faber & Faber, 1989) 116–17, discussing *The Last Temptation of Christ*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Universal Pictures, 1988).

[4] "The First Ecumenical Council: The First Council of Nicaea, 325. The Creed of Nicaea," in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss; vol. 1; London: Yale University Press, 2003) 158–59, at 159; and "The Fourth Ecumenical Council: The Council of Chalcedon, 451: The Definition of Faith." Ibid, 174–81, at 181.

[5] "The Athanasian Creed: *Quicunque vult*, 5th–6th c.," in *Creeds and Confessions*, 675–77, at 677.

> Great things happen when God mixes with man. Without man, God would have no mind on this Earth to reflect upon his creatures intelligibly and to examine, fearfully yet impudently, his wise omnipotence. He would have on this Earth no heart to pity the concerns of others and to struggle to beget virtues and cares which God either did not want, or forgot, or was afraid to fashion. He breathed upon man, however, giving him the power and audacity to continue creation.[6]

Though apparently denying divine omniscience (and indeed attributing to God indifference, amnesia, and fear), Kazantzakis here fleshes out a persuasive model for understanding the purpose of incarnation. Mortal consciousness provides a perspective on existence that must be epistemologically different from divine knowledge. To know earthly intelligence, feel human pity, encounter "the struggle to beget virtue and cares"—these are forms of experiential awareness accessible only to man or to an incarnate God. When Kazantzakis's work was published, this image of a passible God provoked outrage, particularly in his own Greek Orthodox Church,[7] while today it has become much more familiar. Indeed Alister E. McGrath goes so far as to suggest that it has become a "new orthodoxy" for modern Christians to speak of a God who suffers within our world.[8] Rowan Williams finds this emphasis as far back as the post-Apostolic writings of Ignatius of Antioch:

> God was active to save in Jesus of Nazareth; but this activity extends to the suffering and death of Jesus. Is this suffering (so to speak) purely "instrumental" to God? Or is it *his* suffering?[9]

In the twentieth century Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann, Kazoh Kitamori,[10] and many others have written eloquently of the pain and suffering of God and of "the love of the Son and the grief of the Father."[11] If Jesus lived fully as a man of his own time, in Brian Hebblethwaite's words, "subjecting himself to the limitations of real humanity in order to achieve his purposes of revelation and reconciliation,"[12]

[6] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 287.

[7] See Michael Antonakes, "Christ, Kazantzakis and Controversy in Greece," in *God's Struggler: Religion in the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis* (ed. Darren J. Middleton and Peter Bien; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996) 23–35.

[8] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997) 251.

[9] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979) 14.

[10] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; trans. Reginald H. Fuller; London: SCM Press, 1971); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden; New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (trans. M. E. Bratcher; London: SCM Press, 1966) 160.

[11] Moltmann, *Crucified God,* 249.

[12] Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 22.

then he suffered as a man; if God were truly revealing himself in Jesus, then as Hebblethwaite says, the incarnation must also have left its mark on God:

> It lies at the heart of Christianity to suppose that God's omnipotence was both exercised and revealed in his becoming man, subjecting himself to cruel limitations and dying a cruel death. Moreover, that humanity and that human experience are believed to have been permanently taken into the being of God.[13]

The suffering of Jesus, says Rowan Williams, is in some way "taken into God."[14] "God's 'pain,'" affirms Kitamori, "is at once his 'love.'"[15]

Kazantzakis affirms that God is incomplete without man. But the contrary is also true:

> But man, without God, born as he is unarmed, would have been obliterated by hunger, fear and cold; and if he survived these, he would have crawled like a slug midway between the lions and lice; and if with incessant struggle he managed to stand on his hind legs, he would never have been able to escape the tight, warm, tender embrace of his mother the monkey.[16]

By divine *afflatus* alone man becomes capable of intellectual and emotional creativity. As recipient of that godly breath, he acquires "the power and audacity to continue creation" and to do God's work in the world.[17] "Man without God" is a mere animal, haunted by his anthropoid ancestry, and struggling to extricate himself from the coils of evolution. But conversely God without man could have no direct physical knowledge of the human existence that he himself had created.

In this remarkable meditation, Kazantzakis links the dual substance of Christ with the dual nature of man as the product of both nature and God. Creationism and evolution are juxtaposed as respectively theocentric and anthropocentric explanations of the universe. Evolution gets man up onto his hind legs. But the breath of God makes him want to stand. In his autobiographical work *Report to Greco,* Kazantzakis recalled the two great lightning bolts of scientific knowledge that shook his faith as a young man: the solar system and the theory of evolution.[18] The latter destroyed for him the creation story of Genesis:

> The Lord God did not breathe into his nostrils the breath of life, did not give him an immortal soul. Like all other creatures, he is a rung in the infinite chain of animals, a grandson or great-grandson of the ape. If you scratch our hide a little, if you scratch our soul a little, beneath it you will find our grandmother the monkey![19]

[13] Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 66.
[14] Williams, *Wound,* 14.
[15] Kitamori, *Pain,* 161.
[16] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 287.
[17] Ibid.
[18] See Kazantzakis, *Greco*, 116–17.
[19] Ibid., 115.

Obsessively the young Kazantzakis used to watch the behavior of a neighbor's pet monkey, now seen as "a caricature of man." He writes, "Was this my grandmother? . . . was I not a son of God, but of the monkey?"[20] He gives the monkey wine to drink and finds himself in its quasi sexual embrace; as he writes, "Its whole body pressed against mine, it kept sighing like a human."[21] He views the encounter as a "black Annunciation" and the monkey as some "dark angel departing from my window."[22] This attempt to bond with a simian is seen in the autobiographical narrative as both a liberation from dogma and a temptation to embark on a downward course of rediscovering the animal life of the flesh, to search for the dark human roots that Darwin had uncovered.

Kazantzakis's view of the "dual substance" of Christ assumed then that the two natures were utterly distinct, absolutely different, and violently inimical one to another. In taking on human flesh, Jesus inherited and inhabited the contaminated body of human evolution, which Kazantzakis considered a dark material vulnerable to the influence of chthonic powers. Human beings, made equally in the image of God, share this ontological conflict:

> Within me are the dark immemorial forces of the Evil One, human and pre-human; within me too are the luminous forces, human and pre-human, of God—and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.[23]

Christian theologians throughout the centuries have struggled to define this "absolute paradox," as Kierkegaard called the incarnation, to keep the two natures distinct, yet to explain their mysterious concurrence, and to understand how the two natures could have interacted in the one person, Jesus Christ. Kazantzakis's talk of God "mixing" with humanity seems to fall into the "heresy," the confusion of the natures, against which those early credal statements sought so carefully to guard:

> Now this is the catholic faith, that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance.[24]

More than any other foundational doctrine of Christianity, this supposedly symmetrical and stable relationship between the persons of the Trinity has proved in practice a site of controversy. Kazantzakis was a novelist rather than a theologian, but his imaginative attempts to revalue the two natures, to think and feel across what Thomas Aquinas called that great "impassible" boundary,[25] deserve to be

[20] Ibid., 118–19.
[21] Ibid., 120.
[22] Ibid., 120.
[23] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 7.
[24] "Athanasian Creed," *Creeds and Confessions*, 676.
[25] Thomas Aquinas, "The Passion of the Christ," *Summa Theologica* (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Provinces; 5 vols.; Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1911; revised, 1948; repr., 1981) vol. 4, pt. 3, Q. 46, art. 12 , p. 2271.

read alongside the more fully developed philosophical arguments of contemporary Christology.

Jesus in the Novel

In using the novel as a vehicle for theological exploration, Kazantzakis was contributing to a distinctly modern literary form, the twentieth century historical Jesus novel, which began with George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* (1916) and remains active in such recent examples as Anthony Burgess's *Man of Nazareth* (1979), Michele Roberts's *The Wild Girl* (1984), and Jim Crace's *Quarantine* (1999).[26] But the novel, a secular form originating in the rationalist eighteenth-century middle-class culture of Samuel Richardson and Daniel Defoe, was designed to portray the human world, and is not a natural vehicle for representing the divine.

When the novel began to approach the person of Jesus, it was in the form of an anticlerical, secular, and humanizing project. The Jesus of the novel tends to be what he is in *The Brook Kerith*, a historical human being prized away from theological doctrine and ecclesiastical dogma. He may be prophet, poet, teacher, Carlylean hero, Nietzschean superman, moral exemplar, and martyr, but not the crucified and risen Christ.[27] This Jesus—man rather than God—appears in both liberal theology and secular fiction of the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth centuries. Theodor Kiolkowski suggested that historical novels about Jesus, "fictionalizing biographies," differed little from nineteenth century liberal biographies such as Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*,[28] "a literary biography of a humanized Jesus."[29] Both types present the human or the historical Jesus; their common territory is Christology "from below." This is the Jesus of history, not the Jesus of faith: Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus the Christ. As John Macquarrie says, this "will not do" for an incarnational faith: "If we assimilate him too closely to the common human condition, then he is in the same boat with the rest of us, and cannot be the Redeemer."[30]

The twentieth century Jesus novel begins at exactly the point where theologians were beginning to dispense with the liberal "biography" as a useful christological form. The nineteenth century was the high point of theological interest in the life of Jesus, and by the early twentieth century attacks on liberal theology were targetting such "sacred biographies"[31] as fanciful and subjective. " I regard the entire

[26] George Moore, *The Brook Kerith* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1916); Anthony Burgess, *Man of Nazareth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Michele Roberts, *The Wild Girl* (London: Methuen, 1984); Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (London: Picador, 1999).

[27] If considered human but not divine, "Jesus Christ might remain an inspiring moral teacher, to be set alongside Socrates and Confucius, but he could not be a Saviour or Redeemer" (John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited* [London: SCM Press, 1998] 17).

[28] Ernest Renan, *La Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1863).

[29] Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972) 13, 37.

[30] Macquarrie, *Christology*, 17, 19.

[31] Charlotte Allen, *The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1998) 69.

'Life of Jesus' movement as a blind alley," wrote Martin Kähler. Kähler restored the crucifixion and resurrection to their Pauline centrality and reduced the rest of the gospels to "extended introductions" to the "passion narratives."[32] Scepticism about the christological possibilities of imaginative prose encouraged scholars to assume that the Christ of the novel is invariably the human Jesus and that Christ as incarnate God is therefore not representable in modern fiction. As Hans Küng puts it, in a discussion of novels on Jesus, "It is . . . doubtful whether the stylistic aids and methods of literature are really adequate to give expression in words to the life of Jesus, his person and cause, the divine and human elements brought together in a historically concrete person."[33]

In the end, what distinguishes Christianity from other religions is precisely the traditional doctrine of the incarnation or the combination in Christ of both divinity and humanity. As Rowan Greer puts it with admirable simplicity,

> First, since Christ is the Savior and since only God can save, Christ must somehow be God. Second, since the only way God can save us is by touching us and our human condition directly and fully, Christ must somehow be identified with our humanity. Third, these two aspects of Christ's identity must be kept distinct but must not compromise his unity.[34]

Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, Jesus therefore became *bios*, a candidate for biography, and an appropriate object of representation in fiction and film.

Charlotte Allen called *The Last Temptation* "Renan's *Life of Jesus* for the 20th century,"[35] and the work can certainly be read as a representative twentieth century demythologizing Jesus novel. Kazantzakis's Jesus is predominantly human, "full of weakness, self-doubt, and ambivalence."[36] He is not at first consciously aware of his own divine status, his mission of salvation or his destiny of crucifixion. He encounters his divinity as something hostile and alien—a possession, a persecution, a haunting. Although messianic hope is second nature to him, as he is physically and emotionally joined to the suffering body of the Israelite people,[37] he does not initially associate the coming with his own destiny. God comes to him as a dementia, a seizure, or the sensation of claws dug into his skull. This seems less like a perfect hypostatic union than an uneasy affiliation between a weak and fearful human consciousness and a slumbering, latent divinity.

[32] Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964, 1988) 46, 80.

[33] Hans Küng, "The Christ of Literature," in *On Being a Christian* (trans. Edward Quinn; London: Collins, 1978) 139.

[34] Rowan A. Greer, "The Leaven and the Lamb: Christ and Gregory of Nyssa's Vision of Human Destiny," in *Jesus in History and Myth* (ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann and Gerald A. Larue; Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1986) 135–42.

[35] Allen, *Human Christ*, 225.

[36] Marie Katheryn Connelly, *Martin Scorsese: An Analysis of His Feature Films, with a Filmography of His Entire Directorial Career* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1993) 128.

[37] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 56.

Throughout the novel Jesus retains a love of life and of the earth, which seems to conflict with his divine destiny. This attachment is focused in his love for Mary Magdalene, his soul mate.[38] In interior dialogue with a divine voice (a conversation dramatized as Jesus talking to himself), he affirms this conflict and this loyalty:

> I don't care about the kingdom of heaven. I like the earth. I want to marry, I tell you; I want Magdalene.[39]

In the anachronistically-named desert "monastery" (a version of an Essene community that also recalls Kazantzakis's own experiences of monastic communities as described in the "Mt. Athos" and "Sinai" chapters of *Report to Greco*), Jesus confesses and is absolved,[40] although in orthodox teaching he was of course incapable of sin: "His subjection to human weaknesses in common with us did not mean that he shared our sins."[41] Kazantzakis relates a number of Christ's parables but then supplements them with alternative endings. Lazarus, for instance, persuades God to refresh the rich man for all eternity,[42] and the foolish virgins are invited into the wedding.[43] Kazantzakis writes, "Man forgives . . . is it possible then that God does not?"[44] He even conceives of the possibility that ultimately God's mercy might prove infinite, and the devil be welcomed back into heaven like the prodigal son.[45] He gives Judas a special place in the working-out of his destiny, flirts closely with pagan symbolism, and contemplates abdicating the responsibility of the cross. During the final "temptation dream" he lives as a family man with a number of sexual partners. In the same vision he rejects the formation of his own doctrinal legacy both in the gospel according to Matthew and in the teaching of Paul.

In all these respects *The Last Temptation* seems to operate in the medium to which the "fictionalizing biography" seems best adapted, to deprive Jesus of divinity, to humanize and secularize him into a form acceptable to a modern, generally non-Christian, even nonreligious readership. In one of his letters Kazantzakis declared similar aims:

> I wanted to renew and supplement the sacred Myth that underlies the great Christian civilization of the West. It isn't a simple "life of Christ." It's a laborious, sacred, creative endeavour to reincarnate the essence of Christ, setting aside the dross—falsehoods and pettinesses which all the churches and all the cassocked representatives of Christianity have heaped upon his figure, thereby distorting it. . . .
>
> Parables which Christ could not possibly have left as the Gospels relate them I have supplemented, and I have given them the noble and compassionate

[38] Ibid., 47.
[39] Ibid., 34.
[40] Ibid., 156.
[41] Leo I, "The Tome of Leo, 449," in *Creeds and Confessions*, 114–21, at 116.
[42] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 205–7.
[43] Ibid., 222–23.
[44] Ibid., 207.
[45] Ibid., 230. See also *Greco*, 511.

> ending befitting Christ's heart. Words which we do not know that He said I have put into his mouth, because He would have said them if His disciples had had His spiritual force and purity. And everywhere poetry, love of animals and plant life and men, confidence in the soul, certainty that light will prevail.[46]

The objectives Kazantzakis set himself are much the same as those of George Moore, Renan, and indeed the whole nineteenth century critical movement from David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (1835) onwards. They sought to liberate Jesus from the church and to bypass both the Christian doctrine devised by Paul and the "falsifications" of the gospel writers in order to get at the historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth. Much of this language recalls Renan and seemingly endorses Peter Bien's assertion that, "aside from the Gospels, Renan seems to have been Kazantzakis's major source."[47] But Kazantzakis clearly read widely and voraciously in biblical history and criticism while writing the novel, as he writes, "For a year now I've been taking out of the library at Cannes all the books written about Christ and Judea, the Chronicles of that time, the Talmud, etc. And so all the details are historically correct, even though I recognize the right of the poet not to follow history in a slavish way."[48] Kazantzakis seems to have absorbed late-nineteenth-century biblical criticism together with something of the "historical Jesus" quest; as a disciple of Nietzsche, he found the courage to offer to "renew" the Christian "Myth." As Colin Wilson commented:

> Kazantzakis was not intent on creating a sinless god-man. He wanted to create Christ in his own image—tormented by everlasting temptation; a Promethean Jesus, learning, step-by-step, to cast off the fetters of the family, the body, the ego.[49]

All this is consistent with the way in which the novel was received and read as a blasphemous and sacrilegious assault on traditional Christianity and even the faith itself. It explains why it was placed by the Vatican on the index of forbidden books and condemned as "indecent, atheistic, and treasonable" by the Orthodox Church of America. It illustrates why in 1960, fundamentalist American Protestants tried to have it removed from public libraries. There seems almost sufficient justification here to agree with Peter Bien that Kazantzakis effectively "did not believe in God and was not a Christian."[50]

[46] Letter of 13 Nov 1951. Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters* (trans. Amy Mims; Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1968) 505–6.

[47] Peter Bien, *Tempted by Happiness: Kazantzakis' Post-Christian Christ* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 1984) 20.

[48] Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, 505–6.

[49] Colin Wilson, "Kazantzakis," in Colin Wilson and Howard F. Dossor, *Nikos Kazantzakis* (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 1999) 30.

[50] Bien, *Tempted*, 18.

Messiah

This account, however, provides only a partial reading of the novel. Kazantzakis's Jesus may not be conscious of his identity and destiny but is certainly subconsciously aware of them at the level of dream and vision, where much of the novel's narrative operates. Judas sees the cross foreshadowed in Jesus' eyes,[51] and Jesus sees in Judas the vision of his own crucifixion. Jesus speaks in a kind of instinctive prophecy of a messiah much like himself:

> He will die, die wearing his rags. . . . He will die all alone at the top of a barren mountain, wearing on his head a crown of thorns.[52]

However resistant and reluctant a messiah he may be, Jesus leaves home to find God, to turn flesh into spirit, and to seek paradise;[53] thus he spends the entire novel pursuing a spiritual journey that will eventually lead him to Golgotha. The structure of his journey, which corresponds loosely to the four phases mapped out in Kazantzakis's sketchbook (son of the carpenter, Son of man, Son of David, Son of God),[54] shows a Jesus growing through successive stages of evolution into consciousness of his mission in a way perhaps suggested by Luke: "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

Each stage begins with a significant experience and a life-changing development in consciousness. In the monastery Jesus realizes through the vision of the coupling serpents that "everything has two meanings,"[55] and that the snakes represent human desires. As Kazantzakis writes, "he was able for the first time to look into the darkness of his heart and distinguish, one by one, the serpents, which were hissing within him."[56] As the gospel relates, "He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:25). Immediately after this Jesus admits that he has a prompting to "speak to men"[57] and, though unsure of what he will say, has confidence in God to inspire him: "I'll open my mouth, and God will do the talking."[58] In this first "son of man" phase, Jesus preaches a gospel of love,[59] partly through an adaptation of the Sermon on the Mount, and partly through the "supplemented" parables.[60] In this phase he saves Mary Magdalene from stoning.[61]

[51] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 28.

[52] Ibid., 23-24.

[53] Ibid., 87.

[54] See Bien, *Tempted*, 4–5. Kazantzakis uses "son of man" as a human descriptor, while in biblical usage the phrase usually denotes the apocalyptic figure of Dan 7:13 and Rev 1:13, 14:14. See I. Howard Marshall's fine discussion in *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1976, 1990) 63–82.

[55] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 155.

[56] Ibid., 156.

[57] Ibid., 163.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., 190.

[60] Ibid., 188–92.

[61] Ibid., 181–82.

This is Jesus the prophet of love, who moves through Galilee like a bridegroom welcoming the people to a wedding in heaven. Forgiveness is infinite;[62] love replaces law ("The law goes contrary to my heart.").[63] This phase draws to a close with Jesus attempting to open a dialogue with God and initially meeting "an abrupt silence."[64] But like Christ in Gethsemane, Kazantzakis's Jesus finds the answer to his questions in submission to God's will:

> "Lord, O Lord," he murmured, "I cannot fight with you. Tonight I surrender my arms. Your will be done!"[65]

The second phase begins with baptism in the Jordan, where Jesus is inspired by John to assume the mantle of Israel's zealotry and prophetic rage. This Jesus is the "Son of David," who now preaches a Nietzschean gospel of destruction. "The tree is rotten," and Jesus has inherited the Baptist's axe.[66] To this phase belongs the temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus is initially visited in spirit by John. The three temptations of the snake, the lion, and the burning archangel are the core temptations of humanity. The snake is desire, love of the earth, the yearning to have a wife and children, and the hunger for Mary Magdalene. The lion is the fierce and violent passions of animal instinct: the visionary beast proclaims that he is "the deepest voice of your deepest self."[67] The archangel tempts Jesus to think of himself as God. As temptations of desire, power, and authority, these correspond closely enough to the accounts of Matthew and Luke. In the gospels Jesus is not tempted to sin or crime and not offered the violent delights of human depravity. He is tempted by the most natural promptings of human instinct: hunger, evolutionary aspiration, and the will to power.

This is where Kazantzakis parts company with the natural logic of the genre in which he is working. He admits that these promptings are constitutive temptations for human nature and should therefore be accepted as normative rather than as "evil." He does not however—as one might expect from his attachment to both pagan religions and modern philosophy and from his affection for Dionysus,[68] Freidrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx—assert that these natural instincts have been perverted and demonized into "temptations" merely by Christian ecclesiastical dogma. Kazantzakis was not, as William Blake described John Milton, unconsciously of the devil's party; he only thought that the devil should be given his due. His characterization of Judas gives a powerful and compelling voice to these instincts: the need for bread ("the foundation is the body")[69] and the search for

[62] Ibid., 230.
[63] Ibid., 223.
[64] Ibid., 198.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 247.
[67] Ibid., 267.
[68] "Buddha, Christ and Dionysus are one—the eternal suffering man," Morton P. Levitt, in *The Cretan Glance* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1980) 75.
[69] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 209.

justice through power ("the deliverance of Israel").[70] He aimed to "sanctify" Judas against the dominant tradition that had demonized him.[71]

But Jesus is explicitly counterpoised as Judas's opposite in every respect. In the temptation in the wilderness, in the continual ideological struggle with Judas, and in the "Last Temptation" itself, Jesus shows himself fully a man with a man's weakness and desire but a man determined to wrestle with them and to transcend human limitations in a search for godliness. The temptations experienced in the wilderness bring knowledge of the human heart, belly, and mind; this knowledge modifies and enriches Jesus' divine consciousness.

> For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect . . . For because he himself has suffered and been tempted . . . we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. (Heb 2: 16–18; 4:15)

Kazantzakis's Jesus resists the temptations in the wilderness, survives the ordeal, and goes on to master the final temptation from the cross. During this third phase, the "Son of David" phase, Jesus seems at times indistinguishable from John the Baptist;[72] he wields the axe against the rotten tree and wages war against the old law. He is the Son of David, a messiah who will cleanse the world. The raising of Lazarus heralds the opening of the fourth phase, when Jesus fully recognizes himself as Son of God.[73] The awareness is terrifying but also inevitable: God and humanity are one; Jesus the man must submit himself to a divine weight of responsibility. This is the full meaning of incarnation:

> If the strength of the soul was so all-powerful, then all the weight of perdition or salvation fell upon the shoulders of mankind; the borders of God and man are joined.[74]

Jesus reveals to Judas that he is the Messiah. In a prophetic vision of Golgotha he reaffirms the prophecies of Isaiah: "I am the one who is going to die."[75] He explains, "For the world to be saved, I, of my own will, must die."[76] The shadow of the cross is seen to fall from Jesus' own body.[77] Mary Magdalene anoints him for burial, and Jesus declares his mission of salvation at the Last Supper. When he bids Judas to go and do what he has to do,[78] the passion play is complete. He

[70] Ibid., 163.

[71] As Kazantzakis wrote in a letter: "I've raised and sanctified Judas Iscariot right alongside Jesus in this book I'm writing now," Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, 477.

[72] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 309.

[73] Ibid., 377–78.

[74] Ibid., 379.

[75] Ibid., 396.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 397.

[78] Ibid., 438.

dies on the cross, crying, "It is accomplished." As Kazantzakis writes, "It was as though he had said: Everything has begun."[79]

Half God, Half Man

"Every man is half God, half man," wrote Kazantzakis.[80] The duty of a human being is to imitate the model provided by the divine and human incarnated Christ:

> This book was written because I wanted to offer a supreme model to the man who struggles. . . . In order to mount to the Cross, the summit of sacrifice, and to God, the summit of immateriality, Christ passed through all the stages which the man who struggles passes through. That is why his suffering is so familiar to us; that is why we share it, and why his final victory seems to us so much our own future victory. That part of Christ's nature which was profoundly human helps us to understand him and love him and to pursue his Passion as though it were our own. If he had not within him this warm human element, he would never be able to touch our hearts with such assurance and tenderness; he would not be able to become a model for our lives. We struggle, we see him struggle also, and we find strength. We see that we are not all alone in the world; he is fighting at our side.
>
> Every moment of Christ's life is a conflict and a victory. He conquered the invincible enchantment of simple human pleasures; he conquered temptations, continually transubstantiated flesh into spirit, and ascended. Reaching the summit of Golgotha, he mounted the Cross.[81]

However deeply colored by his intimacy with Freidrich Nietzsche, Vladimir Lenin, and the Buddha, ultimately Kazantzakis was writing in *The Last Temptation* a Christian affirmation. The book was written, he states, "in a state of deep religious exaltation, with fervent love for Christ . . . in Christian love."[82] Kazantzakis believed that his imaginative identification with Christ provided him with a specialized knowledge inaccessible to theologians: "While I was writing this book, I felt what Christ felt. I became Christ. And I knew that great temptations, extremely enchanting and often legitimate ones, came to hinder him on his road to Golgotha. But how could the theologians know all this?"[83]

Kazantzakis saw his work not as a repudiation of Christian truth but rather as a revaluation of Christian spirituality for a modern age. But this is not generally how the novel has been read. Kiolkowski argued that Kazantzakis merely colored in the outlines of the biblical narrative and contrasted his raw "imaginative power" unfavourably with Robert Graves's meticulous biblical scholarship.[84] Yet

[79] Ibid., 507.

[80] Kazantzakis, *Greco*, 290.

[81] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 8–9.

[82] Letter of 1 May 1954, in Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, 523.

[83] Letter of 27 November 1952, in Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography,* 515–16.

[84] Kiolkowski, *Transfigurations*, 16, referring to Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (London: Cassell, 1946). Georg Langenhorst partially endorses this view in "The Rediscovery of Jesus as a Literary Figure," *Literature and Theology* 9 (1995) 85–98.

Kazantzakis was clearly attempting a theological as well as an imaginative reworking of the life of Jesus. In trying, as he explicitly affirmed, to "supplement" both scripture and tradition, he was undertaking a theological revision of key doctrinal matters such as the incarnation and the atonement. Morton P. Levitt[85] drew a parallel between Kazantzakis's revisionism and the "flexible and evolving canon" of Christian scripture in the first century C.E., in particular the shift of contextual focus from Jewish prophecy to Eastern mystery religions. "*The Last Temptation*," he argues, "is well within this religious tradition." Kazantzakis's Jesus may not be exactly the Jesus of the Athanasian creed and the definition of Chalcedon. But he is a Jesus for the twentieth century. As Levitt puts it, "What at first seems heresy is in fact an act of devotion."[86]

Fiction and Film

In *The Last Temptation*, Kazantzakis confronted head-on the theological and fictional problems of the incarnation with results that have obviously remained controversial. When Martin Scorsese conceived the idea of adapting the novel into film (with even more controversial repercussions), he followed Kazantzakis into this doctrinal minefield with reckless enthusiasm.

> I found the representation of Christ, stressing the human side of His nature without denying that he is God, the most accessible to me. His divine side doesn't fully comprehend what the human side has to do; how He has to transform Himself and eventually become the sacrifice on the cross—Christ the man only learns about this a little at a time. In the whole first section of the book, He is acting purely on human emotions and human psychology, so he becomes confused and troubled. I thought this neurotic—even psychotic—Jesus was not very different from the shifts of mood and psychology that you find glimpses of in the Gospels.[87]

Despite the disclaimer with which the film opens, "This film is not based on the Gospels but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict," Scorsese clearly thought of the film as involving scriptural exegesis as well as imaginative dramatization. He suggests that the "confused and troubled" consciousness of Jesus could be inferred from the gospel narratives.[88] Like Kazantzakis, Scorsese had no doubts about Jesus' divinity and dual nature but felt that a representation of Jesus in film should be more humanized in order to engage a modern audience:

[85] "Virtually every incident originates in the New Testament, but all are filtered through the screen of comparative myth and enhanced by the author's imaginative vision," Levitt, *Cretan Glance*, 63–66.

[86] Levitt, *Cretan Glance*, 73.

[87] *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 116–17.

[88] Les Keyser emphasizes Scorsese's research into biblical criticism, history, and archaeology, in *Martin Scorsese* (London: Twayne, 1992) 170–71. John Milton clearly drew very similar conclusions, as his Christ in *Paradise Regain'd* is equally confused: "O what a multitude of thoughts at once /

> I believe that Jesus is fully divine, but the teaching at Catholic schools placed such an emphasis on the divine side that if Jesus walked into a room, you'd know He was God because He glowed in the dark, instead of being just another person. But if He was like that, we always thought, then when the temptations came to Him, surely it was easy to resist them because He was God.[89]

"Since the earliest times," says Macquarrie, "a kind of unconscious docetism has been at work"[90] in Christian tradition. Scorsese needed to emphasize the human nature, not simply because it was christologically correct, but because it was necessary in order to create character and drama in film. The film was designed not as an epic but as "an intimate character study,"[91] and its key psychological and moral drama was to be, as in Kazantzakis, the struggle between the human and divine natures:

> I found this an interesting idea, that the human nature of Jesus was fighting him all the way down the line, because it can't conceive of Him being God. I thought this would be great drama and force people to take Jesus seriously—at least to reevaluate his teachings.[92]

Scorsese's scriptwriter and collaborator Paul Schrader, a former Calvinist divinity student, was also fully alive to these issues:

> The two major heresies which emerged in the early Christian Church were the Arian heresy, from Arius, which essentially said that Jesus was a man who pretended to be God,[93] and the other was the Docetan heresy, which said Jesus was really a God who, like a very clever actor, pretended to be a man. . . . *The Last Temptation of Christ* may err on the side of Arianism, but it does little to counteract the 2,000 years of erring on the other side, and it was pleasant to see this debate from the early Church splashed all over the front pages.[94]

Hans Küng observed that writers of fiction have frequently felt inhibited from representing Christ at all, and instead "edge towards the figure of Jesus, speaking of him only indirectly and almost timidly . . . he is observed in the effects he produces on other people . . . he is approached as we pass by the place where he is standing."[95] Here novelists, and later filmmakers, wishing to depict Jesus in God's

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Awakn'd in me swarm, while I consider / What from within I feel my self, and hear / What from without comes often to my ears, / Ill sorting with my present state compar'd." *Paradise Regain'd* (London: John Starkey, 1671) 11–12, lines 196–200.

[89] *Scorsese on Scorsese,* 124.

[90] Macquarrie, *Christology*, 21.

[91] *Scorsese on Scorsese,* 120.

[92] Ibid., 124.

[93] An odd definition of Arius's "subordinationism." See his "Statement of Belief to Alexander of Alexandria, c. 320," in *Creeds and Confessions*, 77–78.

[94] Paul Schrader, *Schrader on Schrader* (ed. Kevin Jackson; London: Faber & Faber, 1990) 139.

[95] Küng, *On Being*, 138.

world, have tried to place God within it, but have shrunk from such depiction on the grounds that human consciousness cannot aspire to a perception of divinity. So we get images of Jesus such as those in the Hollywood screen epic *Ben Hur*, where his face, being the unrepresentable face of God, is never seen.[96]

The most fundamental distinction between such fictions and those which, like *The Last Temptation,* seek to engage imaginatively with the incarnate Christ, is this difference between objective and subjective representation. In films that show only the reflection of light or shadow cast by Christ over the people around him or "the effects he produces on other people"[97] or in works that approach Jesus via the point of view of other biblical or invented characters, Jesus is an object, but not a subject, in the fictional narrative. He is there, and the effects of his being there can be represented, but he is not accessible to the novelist's psychological curiosity. His being is set apart, off limits, and "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:4). Kazantzakis broke this taboo and treated Jesus' dual nature as open to subjective representation, partly as Robin Riley puts it by "introducing psychological instability and doubt into the Jesus character's experience,"[98] and partly by treating the divine as a domain accessible to the human imagination. Riley goes on to suggest that Martin Scorsese also saw the possibility of "placing viewers within Jesus' existential condition of doubt through point-of-view camera work and voice-over narration."[99] Scorsese himself described this technique in detail and admitted to using

> a lot of moving camera . . . a very fluid and almost nervous way of moving the camera. Because [Jesus] was unsure of himself, the camera would be hiding and creeping around Him, caught between following him, and, at the same time, trying to pull back.[100]

Riley adds that, in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, Jesus' "consciousness" is "a sacred space inaccessible to viewers."[101] Scorsese's approach is to get "inside Jesus' mind," and to attempt to "gain access to an area inaccessible to the church itself, Jesus' conscience."[102] Again Riley acknowledges this process as a theological activity and a work of scriptural exegesis (though of a kind he finds repellent). As he writes, "Scorsese has taken a position that his film provides new information about the Christian saviour."[103] Although clearly many saw this effort as blasphemous,

[96] *Ben Hur,* directed by William Wyler (1959), based on the popular book by Lew Wallace, *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Harper, 1880). Gerd Theissen used the figure of Jesus' "shadow" as the title of his attempt to unite historical Christology and fiction: *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (trans. John Boweden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[97] Küng, *On Being*, 138.

[98] Robin Riley, *Faith and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ"* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003) 37.

[99] Riley, *Faith*, 37.

[100] *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 139.

[101] Riley, *Faith*, 48.

[102] Ibid., 47.

[103] Ibid., *Faith,* 38.

Scorsese himself called it "an affirmation of faith."[104] "I made it," he writes, "as a prayer, an act of worship. I wanted to be a priest. My whole life has been movies and religion. That's it. Nothing else."[105]

Just as Kazantzakis sought to "supplement" the gospels, so Scorsese hoped, according to Riley, to extend and to elaborate on traditions of Jesus' representation and to add something new and different to human knowledge of Christ and therefore of God. Certainly Schrader saw this in Kazantzakis: "The greatness of the book is its metaphorical leap into this imagined temptation; that's what separates it from the Bible and makes it a commentary upon it."[106]

Dualism and Sacrament

Both novel and film approach the Promethean task of representing Jesus as God and man in a complete and complex Christology combining the human and the divine. Both novel and film break the taboo of religious fiction by treating the mind of God as accessible to the human imagination, and the taboo of the secular Jesus novel by insisting on the historical and psychological veracity of the dual nature. Both novel and film present a Jesus scandalous or offensive to Christians of many creeds yet do so while affirming a deeply Christian devotional commitment of faith and love.

Ultimately, however, there is a distinction to be made. Kazantzakis remains uncomfortably trapped within a fundamental dualism that sees human life as constructed from irreconcilable antinomies: flesh and spirit, evolution and creation, the body struggling to differentiate itself from its animal roots, and the divine spark donated from above.

> Struggle between the flesh and the spirit, rebellion and resistance, reconciliation and submission, and finally—the supreme purpose of the struggle—union with God: this was the ascent taken by Christ, the ascent which he invites us to take as well.[107]

Although Kazantzakis began with the Christological language of "dual substance," the two natures of Christ seem ultimately in his novel anything but hypostatically united. Flesh and spirit, body and soul, are always seen as irreconcilable opposites. The path that his Jesus follows towards greater understanding is a way of ἄσκησις, of spiritual struggle, that entails divesting the spirit of its encumbrance of flesh. To get nearer to God, you have to get further away from the human condition. Kazantzakis writes, "In order to mount to the Cross, the summit of sacrifice, and to God, the summit of immateriality, Christ passed through all the stages, which the man who struggles passes through." This path of spiritual ascent is always

[104] Letter of 4 March 1988, quoted in Riley, *Faith*, 65.
[105] Quoted in Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1991) 6.
[106] *Schrader on Schrader*, 135.
[107] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 8.

from the material to the "immaterial"[108] and from the flesh to the spirit. The "Last Temptation" is the culmination of this process and the final and ultimate rejection of the domain of the senses, the realm of the flesh, and the world of common human destiny. But this seems to be a betrayal of the principle of incarnation, since it shows Jesus unable to reconcile godliness and life in the body. As Macqarrie says, "to save the whole of man Christ must have taken on the whole of man."[109] "What has not been assumed," said Gregory of Nazianzus, "has not been healed; it is what is united to His divinity that is saved."[110]

Scorsese by contrast views the temptation through a "sacramental" view of life, which admits no absolute separation between body and spirit or between flesh and Word. As Michael Bliss puts it,

> through the film, it is the reward of God's plan that one can usually only realise the spiritual through the material realm. What the Last Temptation posits is that once one realises the essential divinity in all material things . . . one transcends the material aspect of objects and sees deep into their true nature, which is divine.[111]

As a number of critics have recently argued, Scorsese's films reveal a world in which religion and reality continually interpenetrate. Richard A. Blake has written of the sacramental universe of Scorsese's films, where material objects reveal the absence of the holy as well as its presence.[112] For Scorsese the spiritual is always immanent in the material, and the material always ready to split open to disclose its spiritual content. This "sacramentalizing of the real," as Leo Braudy[113] calls it, provides a different conception of the relationship between materiality and the divine from Kazantzakis's tortured dualism.

> The common . . . assumption has long been that where there is a dichotomy, one side must triumph over the other; one side must be associated with good while the other is associated with evil. Yet Scorsese's delicate handling of the life of Jesus demonstrates that this is not so. . . . Spirit and flesh may be at war, but as the Christ, Jesus affirms both to be good. Though his destiny is to take a path of nearly pure spirit, he is tempted by the beauty of material creation because it too is of God.[114]

[108] Ibid.

[109] Macquarrie, *Christology*, 52.

[110] "Gregory of Nazianzus on Apollinarianism," in *The Christian Theology Reader* (ed. Alister E. McGrath; 2d ed., Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995; 2001) 258–59, at 259.

[111] Michael Bliss, *The Word Made Flesh: Catholicism and Conflict in the Films of Martin Scorsese* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1995) 92.

[112] Richard A. Blake, "Redeemed in Blood: the Sacramental Universe of Martin Scorsese," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24 (1996) 1–20.

[113] Leo Braudy, "The Sacraments of Genre: Coppola, DePalma, Scorsese," in *Film Quarterly*, 39 (1986) 17–28, at 18.

[114] Christine Hoff Kraemer, "Wrestling with Flesh, Wrestling with Spirit: The Painful Consequences of Dualism in *The Last Temptation of Christ*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall 2004). Cited 30 August 2006. Online: http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-lasttemptation-print.html.

"Both sides of the paradox," as John Macquarrie said of the incarnation, "must find adequate expression."[115] Here in Scorsese's film, flesh and spirit can find a possible, though never easy or painless, reconciliation. This truly is, as far as the world of art is concerned, incarnation, or the Word become flesh.

Enlightenment or Wholeness?

The distinction I am making here between Kazantzakis and Scorsese is a distinction between dualistic and holistic Christian theologies: one docetic, the other incarnational; one in search (to use Rowan Williams's dichotomy) of "enlightenment," the other of "wholeness."[116] But this assumes that Kazantzakis was working, as he claimed to be, within a framework of Christian ideas. Was this actually the case? Or would it be truer to concur with the view summarized by Darren J. N. Middleton, that "his religious vision falls outside the traditional bounds of Christian speculation"?[117] A voraciously eclectic thinker, Kazantzakis absorbed and adopted philosophical ideas from a number of sources and authorities. He was particularly influenced, for instance, by Buddhism, which seems to be reflected in his notion of spiritual ascent. In *Zorba the Greek*, Buddha is the "last man," the " 'pure soul' which has emptied itself."[118] In *Report to Greco*, Kazantzakis described a glimpse of the possibility of enlightenment that is expressed in this same language of an upward spiritual climb:

> An ascent flashed before me, a rocky ascent with a red track upon it and a man who was climbing. . . . I suddenly discerned the supreme peak above me—the Silence, Buddha. Finally I saw the yearning which began to rage inside me, the yearning to extricate myself forever from all deceptions.[119]

"The message of the Buddha," says Carnegie Samuel Calians, "is to free oneself from fear and hope by giving up desire. Kazantzakis, a man of desires, had an undying struggle with the Buddha, which left its imprint as indicated on his tombstone epitaph."[120] Many other critics have identified the Buddhist search for enlightenment in Kazantzakis's notion of spiritual ascent. As Lewis Owens writes,

> Kazantzakis . . . considered humanity's greatest duty to be the transubstantiation of all matter into spirit, an idea drawn predominantly from Buddha and

[115] Macquarrie, *Christology,* 21.

[116] Williams, *Wound,* 2.

[117] Darren J. N. Middleton, "Kazantzakis and Christian Doctrine: Some Bridges of Understanding," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* [*JMGS*] 16 (1998) 285–306, at 285.

[118] *Zorba the Greek* (trans. Carl Wildman; London: John Lehmann, 1952; repr. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1959) 142.

[119] Kazantzakis, *Greco*, 364.

[120] Carnegie Samuel Calians, "Kazantzakis: Prophet of Non-Hope," *Theology Today* [*ThTo*] 28:1 (1971) 37-48, at 40. The epitaph on Kazantzakis's grave in Heraklion reads: Δεν ελπίζω τίποτα, δεν φοβάμαι τίποτα, είμαι ελέυθερος, "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free."

> from Bergson's immanent life force, the *élan vital*, which seeks freedom from material obstruction and imprisonment.[121]

Charalampos-Dēmētrēs Gounelas defined Kazantzakis's philosophy as "a conjunction between Christian asceticism and Buddhism."[122] But it is not necessary to seek explanation in other faiths and philosophies for Kazantzakis's ascetic dualism. The notion of the "spiritual ascent" lies at the heart of the Greek Orthodox spirituality in which he was raised, especially of its monastic culture. It was articulated in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacos, a seventh-century writer whose memory is celebrated twice a year in the Orthodox Church. The book describes how the spiritual struggler must pass through thirty stages of spiritual development upwards towards the ultimate goal of ἄσκησις—theosis, divinization, and salvation from mortality. Paintings and mosaics of the ladder are to be found prominently in the narthex of some of the churches of the holy mountain of Athos.[123]

Throughout his life Kazantzakis was fascinated by the monastic ideal of withdrawal from the world and by the ascetic *vita contemplativa* of the desert fathers. As a young man he undertook pilgrimages, as described in *Report to Greco*, to the monastic communities of Mt. Athos and to St. Catherine's monastery in Sinai. From the hermit Father Makarios on Mt. Athos, he received the uncompromising message that there is only one way to salvation.

> Ascent. To climb a series of steps. From the full stomach to hunger, from the slaked throat to thirst, from joy to suffering. God sits at the summit of hunger, thirst and suffering; the devil sits at the summit of the comfortable life. Choose.[124]

One would expect to find such views promulgated by ascetics of whatever creed, but the "high Christology" implied by such asceticism runs deep in Orthodox theology. Indeed, some of its leading authorities concur that there is a particularly distinct continuity between monastic culture and lay belief. "There is a great richness of forms of spiritual life to be found within the bounds of Orthodoxy," writes Vladimir Lossky, "but monasticism remains the most classical of all."[125] "The best way to penetrate Orthodox spirituality," said Paul Evdokimov, "is to enter it through monasticism."[126]

[121] Lewis Owens, " 'Does This One Exist?': The Unveiled Abyss of Nikos Kazantzakis," *JMGS* 16:2 (1998) 331–43, at 336–337.

[122] Charalampos-Dēmētrēs Gounelas, "The Concept of Resemblance in Kazantzakis's Tragedies *Christ* and *Buddha*," *JMGS* 16 (1998) 313–30, at 316.

[123] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell; Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1982).

[124] Kazantzakis, *Greco*, 223.

[125] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius; London: J. Clarke, 1957; repr., Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) 17.

[126] Paul Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1959), quoted in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, New Edition, 1993) 36.

The Orthodox Church, of course, owed its separate identity to those same disputes over the "dual substance" of Christ with which we began. The schism of 1054 was triggered by the addition of the *filioque* clause to the Creed, a doctrinal difference that still separates the Western and Eastern churches.

> Western theology confesses that in the immanent Trinity the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and Eastern theology confesses that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only.[127]

In Orthodox theology "God is the wholly Other,"[128] "absolutely transcendent,"[129] and the "divine incomprehensibility."[130] Proximity to God consists in a "spirituality of the surpassing of all created being."[131] God is immaterial and unknowable, so to approach him is to effect a "transition from the created to the uncreated."[132] Reconciliation with God can be achieved only through a "way of ascension,"[133] which entails detachment from all created things and ends only in a transformation of the human into the divine or a "union with God or deification."[134] Orthodox belief deploys the distinctions, devised by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late fifth/early sixth centuries), between cataphatic and apophatic and between affirmative and negative theologies:

> The first leads us to some knowledge of God, but is an imperfect way. The perfect way, the only way that is fitting in regard to God, who is of His very nature unknowable, is the second, which leads us finally to total ignorance. All knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is.[135]

Lossky then defines the path towards God in terms of an "ascent" that accords precisely with Kazantzakis's language of spiritual struggle:

> It is by unknowing that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge. Proceeding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance.[136]

[127] Alar Laats, *Doctrines of the Trinity in Eastern and Western Theologies: A Study with Special Reference to K. Barth and V. Lossky* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1999) 11.

[128] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995) 11.

[129] Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 209.

[130] Lossky, *Mystical*, 28.

[131] Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1963) 168.

[132] Laats, *Doctrines*, 82.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Lossky, *Mystical*, 9.

[135] Ibid., 25.

[136] Ibid.

It has been suggested that Orthodoxy has always been instinctively more docetist than the Western church and that the contrast can be illustrated by comparing the Eastern Orthodox icon with its hieratic elevated figures of spiritual authority with the suffering body on the cross. As Allen writes, "The focus of Eastern Christianity was on Jesus' incarnation, the process by which the divine being descended from heaven to become a man."[137] In Christ, Lossky states, "transcendence is made immanent."[138] Icons are "expressions of the inexpressible, and have become possible thanks to the revelation of God, which was accomplished in the Incarnation of the Son."[139] Here contingency is virtually an accident of the incarnation, where the perfect almost reluctantly reveals itself through imperfection. As Rowan Williams said of Gnosticism, this theology entails "a flight from the particular":

> If this is so, there can be no sense of human experience in its entirety and its individual variety as the theatre of God's saving work, a work of art to be completed. What is "authentic" in human life is solely what is radically free from the conditioned and the historical.[140]

These tensions are certainly present in East-West Christian dialogue, as they have been present ever since writing about the incarnation of Jesus first began; and one can certainly link Eastern spirituality with high Christologies, and vice versa. Process theology and the suffering God are scarcely compatible with the "absolutely transcendent" God of Orthodox theologians, who insist that no created thing has any communion with the supreme nature.[141] Even the *filioque* dispute itself, which Ware admits is "technical and obscure"[142] but by no means "trivial," remains to characterize God the Father in Eastern spirituality as sole begetter and to clear the Holy Spirit of any possible contamination from the human nature adopted by the Son.[143]

[137] Allen, *Human*, 68.

[138] Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978) 34.

[139] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974; repr., London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1975) 150.

[140] Williams, *Wound*, 23.

[141] Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 208–9.

[142] Ibid., 210. "This interpolation . . . must have seemed to the theological layman mere hair-splitting." Vivian Green, *A New History of Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 70.

[143] In reality the shared Christian heritage reveals far more commonality than difference. Docetic variants of Christology have been frequent in the West. The path of spiritual ascent is a shared concept familiar from mediaeval and early modern Western mysticism, from *The Ladder of Perfection* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* to St. John of the Cross and beyond. Ascetic Christianity has flourished in different times and places across the schismatic divide, often drawing on common roots from the first millennium.

The Last Temptation

I shall now proceed to compare the "Last Temptation" sequences in novel and film in order to test the hypothesis that Kazantzakis and Scorsese represent widely different points on the spectrum of Christological doctrine.

> Temptation—the Last Temptation—was waiting for him upon the Cross. Before the fainted eyes of the Crucified the spirit of the Evil One, in an instantaneous flash, unfolded the deceptive vision of a calm and happy life.[144]

Should the "Last Temptation" sequence of the novel (chapters 30–33) be read as a "deceptive vision" or as a confrontation with what Kazantzakis called "the invincible enchantment of simple human pleasures,"[145] which refers to temptations that are as natural to human life as spirituality? If the former, then the entire sequence narrated in these chapters is a dream or a hallucination constructed by the "Evil One," and the Last Temptation is a mere momentary distraction from the stern duty of salvation. Renunciation of this world and its pleasures is the price that has to be paid for spiritual transcendence. If the latter, then it scarcely needs the mediation of the "Evil One" to reveal that love, sex, the pleasures of family and children, and affinity with the earth are natural human affections and that, as Alfred North Whitehead put it, "appetitive vision and physical enjoyment have equal claim to priority in creation."[146] On this reading the temptations are both "enchanting" and "legitimate," and the death of the cross should subsume and enfold the temptations into a vision of ultimate reconciliation between God and humanity, humanity and the earth, and spirit and body. The world is not the stony wilderness where Mary Magdalene meets her death, but a place of beauty in which humanity can meet God without surrendering physical nature. It is a world reenchanted by God's return and humanity's spiritual struggle to realize God. In terms of atonement, the former view is consistent with ideas of satisfaction and penalty, since Christ is paying the price of renunciation as well as the penalty of sin. Humanity is so utterly and originally corrupt that only the supreme penalty of death can redeem us from the doom of divine displeasure. But the latter is more consistent with significant currents of modern Christology, since it shows Christ as a God who "so loved the world" and humanity that his attachment to it constituted a true sharing of humanity in all its joys and sorrows, pains, and pleasures.

> God in Christ takes upon *himself* responsibility for all the world's ills. God bears the brunt of suffering and evil by subjecting *himself* to their cruelty and horror. By so doing, he reveals, as he could in no other way, the reality and depth and costly nature of his forgiving love. And by this identification

[144] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 7.

[145] Ibid., 8.

[146] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929; new ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne; New York: The Free Press, 1978) 348.

> of himself with us and our predicament he draws us to himself in an utterly moral and personal way.[147]

This of course has profound implications for the "imitation of Christ," one of Kazantzakis's key themes ("I became Christ"),[148] and for our whole view of the material world:

> The belief that God's love is enacted and made manifest in the Incarnation and the Cross . . . shows that the material is not alien to the spiritual, but that the body is to be seen as the vehicle of the spirit. This is spelled out further in Christian sacramental theology, and is often generalised as a sacramental view of the universe.[149]

I shall argue in conclusion that Kazantzakis's novel is closer to the "deception" reading of the "Last Temptation," in which the world of the flesh is thoroughly contaminated by sinful desire and the presence of evil, and only a fierce asceticism can achieve the renunciation and purification required for redemption. Martin Scorsese's film, on the other hand, seems to me to bring about the reconciliation of spirit and flesh in a sacramental vision of a reenchanted world, which fulfills Kazantzakis's stated intention

> to reconcile those two primordial forces which are so contrary to one another, to make them realise that they are not enemies but rather fellow-workers, so that they might rejoice in their harmony.[150]

Kazantsakis and Scorsese

In the novel, the "Last Temptation" itself begins as an experience of resurrection. In keeping with mediaeval symbolism and iconography, the cross has transformed into a flowering tree,[151] Golgotha into paradise, and pain into healing: "the compassionate tree shed its flowers, one by one, into his thorn-entangled hair."[152] The first suggestion that this resurrection is illusory appears in the figure of the "guardian angel," who accompanies Jesus throughout the vision. The angel is suspiciously humanoid and sensuous with eyes "full of passion,"[153] hairy legs, and sweaty armpits. "You lived your entire Passion in a dream,"[154] he tells Jesus. Reality and dream are inverted; Jesus mistakes reality for dream and dream for reality. The dream

[147] Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 23.

[148] Letter of 27 November 1952, Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, 515.

[149] Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 43.

[150] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 7.

[151] "The traditional Armenian cross sprouts blossoming branches," Elizabeth Theokritoff, in "Embodied Word and New Creation: Some Modern Orthodox Insights Concerning the Material World," in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West* (ed. John Behr, Andrew Lough, Dimitri Conomos; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003) 221–38. Quotation 226.

[152] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 454.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid., 455.

offers the simple pleasures of the earth: "Wine, laughter, the lips of a woman."[155] The earth seems transfigured into paradise, where "the earth is good,"[156] but only because Jesus' perception of it has changed; previously he was alienated from the earth but now he is reconciled with it. "Harmony," Kazantzakis writes, "between the earth and the heart, Jesus of Nazareth: that is the Kingdom of heaven."[157] The angel shows Jesus a young black bull tethered in a thicket and offers to release him. Here Jesus is initiated into pagan mystery, since the bull is bull-horned Dionysos himself, "a dark and wounded God,"[158] who represents the physical being "full of virility."[159] As the bull is released and begins to mount a field full of heifers, Jesus is rejoined by Mary Magdalene. But this Mary seems of a piece with the dream and an instrument of delusion: "he saw her eye frolic seductively, cunningly, like the eye of the angel."[160] Mary inducts Jesus into a new faith in the world and the body: "I never knew the world was so beautiful or the flesh so holy."[161] For Kazantzakis this is a new incarnation: "The road by which the mortal becomes immortal, the road by which God descends to earth in human shape."[162]

What happens to Mary Magdalene, however, confirms the status of this "deceptive vision." Immediately following their reunion, she finds herself outside the dream paradise and in a barren landscape—"Rocks, flints, a few brambles"—and there meets the death by stoning (now at the hands of Saul of Tarsus) that she would have received had Jesus not saved her. This is more than a "deceptive vision"; it is a reordering of reality, the emergence of an alternative history in which the saving power of the Messiah has never been exercised; it is an alternative reality in which Mary pays the full penalty of the Mosaic Law. Jesus' mind leaves his body and follows Mary in the form of a hawk. By this clumsy device, Jesus is able to observe what happens outside his own dream. But the episode makes clear the implications of the "Last Temptation": the world really does lie unredeemed, sins unforgiven, the old law still in place, and mankind unsaved.

Still inside his dream, the death of Mary hardly touches Jesus. Awakening as if in the tomb on "rich mortuary soil,"[163] Jesus has only an impression of Mary's death, "stones, a woman, and blood,"[164] but is further seduced by the song of another woman: "a weaver sitting before her machine and singing. Her voice was exceedingly sweet and full of complaint."[165] The angel guides Jesus towards another mate, Mary the sister of Lazarus, since all women are one woman or anonymous

[155] Ibid., 456.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 457.
[158] Ibid., 458.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid., 459.
[161] Ibid., 460.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid., 464.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., 465.

representatives of the archetypal feminine. Mary the weaver recalls Athena the master weaver as well as Odysseus's faithful Penelope. Earlier Mary Magdalene, unconsciously preparing for his death, had been shown weaving a woollen cloak to protect her lover against the cold.[166] In that earlier passage, she is also guardian of a pomegranate tree; so she is Persephone as well as Penelope. Jesus met her there as the bridegroom from the Song of Songs and raised her from the ground as both a bride and as the human soul.[167] Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is also described as "seeking" Jesus; so she also, like the priestess in D. H. Lawrence's story *The Man Who Died* (1929),[168] is Isis in search.

The angel, however, gives Jesus a false account of Mary Magdalene's death; pierced by the divine arrow, "at the peak of her happiness . . . can there be a greater joy for a woman?"[169] The discrepancy between his description and the earlier narrative makes clear again the distinction between reality and "deceptive vision."[170] Jesus drifts into polygamy, taking both Mary and Martha as wives, under the seductive advice of the angel: "That is the way the Saviour comes: gradually, from embrace to embrace, from son to son. That is the road."[171] The first realization of the true status of the vision comes through Mary, who has a dream, a dream of reality, within the dream. Instinctively she realizes that their dream life is a tissue of "[l]ies created by the Tempter to deceive us."[172]

But Jesus' meeting with Paul again confirms that the vision is not just illusion but rather the imaginative realization of a world in which Christ has not died. Paul has no choice but to construct the fiction of Jesus' death and resurrection: "The Crucified and Resurrected Jesus has been the one precious consolation for the honest man."[173] This belief survives the realization that it has no historical foundation: "I create the truth, create it out of obstinacy and longing and faith."[174] Jesus repudiates Paul's theology but does not shake his faith. "Who asked you?" responds Paul, "I have no need of your permission. Why do you stick your nose in my affairs?" It is the Grand Inquisitor's question from *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Why hast thou come now to hinder us?"[175] Paul has become the Paul of *The Brook Kerith*, because Jesus has not died on the Cross.

But this is not of course where Kazantzakis comes to rest. The arrival of the apostles signals the breaking of the spell, the enchantment dissolved, and the illusion revealed. The guardian angel was Satan. Jesus completes his final cry, and

[166] Ibid., 336–37.
[167] Ibid.
[168] First published as *The Escaped Cock* (Paris: Black Sun, 1929).
[169] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 466.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid., 469.
[172] Ibid., 479.
[173] Ibid., 488.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (first published in *Russky Viestnik*, 1879–1880; trans. Constance Garnett; London: William Heinemann, 1912) 271.

empties himself into the death of the cross. Both the passion and the novel are "accomplished."

Scorsese's film treatment seems to have shared the same objectives as the novel. The "Last Temptation" was to be in his words represented as a "fantasy," a "hallucination," and a "diabolical temptation."[176] In an early draft of the script, there were to be two figures of Jesus; one remained unchanged on the cross, while the other lived through this hallucination of ordinary life. This technique would have secured a visible gap between unredeemed reality and deceptive vision. But when the angel shows Jesus the world, saying "we really envy you," where Kazantzakis could fabricate in prose a poetic paradise that also seems fully dream-like, both enchanting and deceptive, Scorsese's camera shows only a real landscape of breathtaking beauty with Jesus and the angel poised at the edge like figures in a mediaeval or renaissance painting. The viewer is provided with no aesthetic or moral space in which such beauty could be identified as an illusion.

Scorsese's treatment, though often taken word for word and image for image from the novel, is radically different from Kazantzakis's in its dramatic and poetic effects. His choice of a beautiful young girl dressed in peasant costume but with the face and hair of a renaissance angel is a decisive departure. He considered using a young Arab boy or an old man[177] but settled on the young girl partly (and surely ironically) as an echo of Pasolini's angel Gabriel.[178] The angel remains throughout her performance sensitive and sympathetic; gone are Kazantzakis's transformations from angel to Ethiopian slave or the clear signals in the novel of demonic deceitfulness and dissimulation. In the draft script the angel is identified as Satan by Judas and assumes a suitably diabolical form:

> As they watch he transforms himself into a death figure in a black monk's habit.
>
> Jesus is left alone with the "death figure," who speaks to him:
>
> "I told you we would meet again . . . There's nothing you can do. You lived this life. You accepted it. It's over now. Just finish it and die like a man."[179]

Jesus has to crawl past the "death figure" to make his way outside, where he begs the Father to restore him to the Cross.

In the final film version, the angel is certainly intended as Satan, explicitly identified by Kazantzakis as the "Evil One." Judas unmasks her, and we glimpse

[176] Keyser, *Scorsese,* 179.

[177] See Paul Schrader, *The Last Temptation of Christ,* draft script, *American Film Scripts Online* (Chicago: Alexander Street Press, 2002), scene 73. Accessed via University of Hertfordshire Learning and Information Services, 26 January 2006. The draft script retains the angelic/demonic "old man."

[178] *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 143.

[179] Schrader, draft script, scene 87.

again the burning archangel of the temptation in the wilderness. The child's face, however, shows only hurt and disappointment. This is either a Satan of supremely compelling persuasiveness or a Satan who presides innocuously over the simple pleasures of everyday life, "the invincible enchantment of simple human pleasures" and the "harmless attachment to places and things,"[180] like some minor pagan domestic god. The effect is utterly different from what it would have been if the "death figure" from Schrader's draft script had been retained.

It is also what Scorsese adds to Kazantzakis's narrative that complicates the representation. The angel's first action, in an interpolated sequence that has no place in the novel, is to take Jesus down from the cross, to remove gently the nails, and to kiss the wounded, bloodstained hands and feet.[181] The poetic impact of this moment is extraordinary. It has all the beauty of a renaissance deposition together with the highly charged eroticism of mediaeval Catholic martyrology (Scorsese admits that as a child such images made him go "weak at the knees"). Many viewers have flinched at this moment in the film. Either Satan is duping everyone—character, actor, director, viewer—or the spectator is compelled to accept these images—images of healing, liberation from suffering, manumission from pain, images, in short, of redemption— at face value.

The complexity deepens when the angel draws a comparison with the story of Abraham and Isaac:

> Remember when he told Abraham to sacrifice his son? Just as Abraham lifted his knife, God saved Isaac. If he saved Abraham's son, don't you think he'd want to save his own? He tested you, and he's pleased. He doesn't want your blood.[182]

But it was not the devil in disguise, who called to Abraham, but the angel of the Lord; it was not the suggestion of Satan, but the command of God, that made Abraham stay his hand. Just as Kazantzakis supplemented Christ's parables with redemptive conclusions, so Scorsese retrospectively completed the parallel between the sacrifices of Isaac and of Jesus by arresting the process of crucifixion. Again this is entirely consistent with some modern Christologies. If the purpose of the passion is to enact and manifest God's love, then the supreme sacrifice has already been made, through suffering and subjection, and does not need to fulfil itself in death. Isaac was just as surely restored to Abraham, as Kierkegaard made clear, though he did not pay the penalty of death.[183] Hebblethwaite adds, "God's forgiving love does not depend on the death of Christ, but rather is manifested and enacted in it."[184] "*He doesn't want your blood.*"[185] The affection with which the angel kisses

[180] Williams, *Wound*, 165.

[181] Schrader, draft script, scene 73.

[182] Schrader, draft script, scene 73.

[183] Sören Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (trans. Alistair Hannay; London: Penguin, 1985; repr., 2003) 65. "Abraham for the second time received a son against every expectation," 44.

[184] Hebblethwaite, *Incarnation*, 37.

[185] Schrader, draft script, scene 73. My italics.

Christ's wounds echoes the love practised for centuries by Catholic Christians in the adoration of Christ's wounds or in the veneration of the cross. Here we see both human and divine love, enacted, manifested, and mutually reciprocated. The identity of the liberator as Satan simply evaporates from the visual poetry of the film.

In the controversial scene where Jesus and Mary Magdalene make love, many viewers again seem to have had their vision obstructed by moral outrage. Jesus and Mary spend fifty seconds having sexual intercourse. But almost two minutes of screen time are devoted to Mary dressing the dead Jesus' wounds, which she washes and anoints with some kind of healing ointment. His body lies across her knees as in a *Pieta*. Here Mary is not anointing the body for burial but healing the body for a physical resurrection. Like the priestess of Isis in Lawrence's story, she heals the wounds of the cross with love and brings her Osiris back together with feminine power and sexual healing.

Scorsese faithfully follows the logic of Kazantzakis's "deceptive vision": the invented gospel of Paul, the embittered disciples, and Jerusalem in flames. But there is a substantial difference as exemplified in the description of Mary Magdalene's death. Kazantzakis shows the world deprived of salvation and Mary dying as she should have without Jesus' salvific intervention. Scorsese shows Mary Magdalene smiling beatifically in rapture, as God takes her into the light. In the draft script, Mary even says: "Death is kind."[186] In Kazantzakis's narrative, this is how the angel pretends she died.[187] In Kazantzakis's version, this discrepancy is an element of satanic "deception." But for Scorsese this is how it should happen: Mary should be taken peacefully to God's mercy in a world of enchantment without any shadow of disillusion.

Christology

The glamour of asceticism both drew and repelled Kazantzakis and to some degree persuaded him to see corporeal existence as a degradation and contamination of spirituality. He always wanted to ascend the holy mountain, the "Blessed Mountain" of spiritual transcendence, but in keeping with the aphorism of Kahlil Gibran that prefaces this essay, once at the summit, he always wanted to come down again. Nonetheless he left something of himself up there. Ultimately it is this passion for transcendence that explains why Kazantzakis's vision finally belongs, perhaps surprisingly, to "Christology from above" rather than "from below."

> Kazantzakis relates materialism to Everyman, making Jesus resist the universal temptation to place comfort, security, reputation and progeny above the pain, loneliness and martyrdom of a life devoted to the spirit.[188]

[186] Schrader, draft script, scene 77.

[187] Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 466.

[188] Peter Bien, "Scorsese's Spiritual Jesus" (1988), Society of Cretan Historical Studies, *Nikos Kazantzakis Homepage* [cited 30 August 2006]. Online: http://www.historical-museum.gr/kazantzakis/bien.thml.

He insisted so forcefully on Christ's humanity precisely because he was reacting so strongly against the relative abstractedness of a high Christology. But this docetism was within him as well as without. Even as a child, as he claims in *Report to Greco*, he wanted to be both hero and saint.[189] He clearly drew the aspiration from his immediate religious context, but his performance of it, if truly delineated, rendered him a strange and idiosyncratic figure within his culture. He was, in the end, a loyal son of his church, a heretic perhaps, but very much a Greek Orthodox heretic, and no other kind.[190]

Although Martin Scorsese was also drawn to the sacerdotal life, glimpses of the blessed mountain only confirmed him in his commitment to "those who dwell in the deepest valley."

> I've read about many aspects of Kazantzakis' life . . . I find it fascinating how he followed different routes to find God or his spirituality, going up to Mount Athos and staying in a monastery, and finally writing these books in the last ten years of his life. . . . I go more towards *Mean Streets* where you try to find yourself, because I'm dealing with this urban existence. I'm not like Thoreau, I don't go to Walden.[191]

Scorsese's imagination as an artist has always occupied the "Mean Streets" of the modern city, and the quest for spiritual understanding, whether of the self or of God, has to take place in that "deepest valley." Again, though a lapsed Catholic, it was the urban Latin Catholicism of New York's Little Italy from which his lapsing took place and which paradoxically provided him with the language and iconography of his apostasy. Capable of seeing the ordinary transfigured by grace, Scorsese sees no fundamental or absolute distinction between mountain and valley or between the spirit and the world. "The supernatural should exist alongside the natural," he said of his film; "I wanted to take the risk and keep the supernatural on the same level as the natural."[192]

Both Kazantzakis and Scorsese were consciously and explicitly working outside the church and outside the framework of what they knew as official Christian doctrine. Kazantzakis embraced the identity of the heretic as hero, and Scorsese

[189] "Freedom was my first great desire. The second, which remains hidden within me to this day, tormenting me, was the desire for sanctity. Hero together with saint: such is mankind's supreme model" (Kazantzakis, *Greco,* 71).

[190] A resurrected Kazantzakis would find the contemporary Orthodox Church much more hospitable than that of the 1950s. In a discussion of iconoclasm Timothy [Bishop Kallistos] Ware rejects iconoclasm for assuming that "the spiritual must be non-material": "This is to betray the Incarnation, by allowing no place to Christ's humanity, to His body; it is to forget that our body as well as our soul must be saved and transfigured" (*Orthodox Church*, 33). And in a recent article Elizabeth Theokritoff cites a substantial Orthodox consensus to the effect that "the material world" is "integral to the divine purpose. It is not disposable packaging for the spiritual" (Theokritoff, "Embodied," 226).

[191] *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 135.

[192] Ibid., 118, 143.

spoke rather sadly of his reluctant separation from the church. Neither speaks for the church or for a denominational creed.

What we do find in their work is vivid, imaginative, and intellectually strenuous engagements with fundamental issues of Christian theology in each case distinctively marked by the character of the particular mother church. Both show themselves, in their work, to be genuine lovers of Christ; both seriously accept a vocation of Christian loyalty and devotion. Both are artists speaking to a wide community of readers and spectators composed of Christians, agnostics, atheists, and members of other faiths. They both attempted to reinterpret Jesus and his salvific destiny for themselves in exercises of devotional meditation and for others in narrative and poetic extrapolations of the holy scriptures. Both operated in creative media that have been saturated (not naturally, but by tradition and convention) with the material world and with the physical body including the discursive and visual languages of landscape, the city, and the human voice and face; yet both insistently pursued, in their chosen creative language, the difficult and elusive matrix of incarnation.

By courting controversy, both artists ensured that their work would be challenged and condemned by many as irreligious and anti-Christian. Some interpreters have endorsed this perspective and claimed *The Last Temptation* for humanism: "I do not wish to claim that Kazantzakis was an orthodox Christian," wrote Peter Bien. "He lost his faith while still a teenager because he could not reconcile Darwin's teachings with Christianity's promise of an afterlife."[193] Calians presents a finely balanced reading of Kazantzakis that leaves the writer poised between Christian orthodoxy and heresy:

> Kazantzakis' understating of God is both an affirmation and a denial of traditional Christian theology. His radical affirmation of the incarnation (God coming into human flesh) is at the same time a denial of the incarnation (transforming *all* matter into spirit). Christian theology insists on the organic oneness of flesh and spirit as witnessed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.[194]

Others, however, have acknowledged the contribution made by both Kazantzakis and Scorsese to Christian ways of seeing, thinking and feeling. Darren J. N. Middleton hoped to "rehabilitate" Kazantzakis and "to rescue him from those who have disowned him as an unbeliever." Middleton shows that in his views on the mutability of God, the humanity of Christ, and the participation of mankind in salvation, Kazantzakis was closer to modern Christology than to the traditional teaching of the church in his own time.

> His soteriological beliefs were so radical at his time that there were few bridges to link him to the Christian past or present. Therefore, we cannot entirely blame the Church of the 1950s for labelling Kazantzakis's soteriology "scandalous." Nevertheless . . . leading Christian writers in the modern

[193] Bien, "Spiritual Jesus," 2.
[194] Calians, "Prophet," 48.

> period are reinterpreting the soteriological aspects of the faith in ways more conducive to Kazantzakis's own soteriology and to the spirit of our age.[195]

Martin Scorsese has also been recognized as one whose imaginative recreation of the gospels constituted a genuine theological exploration of areas often deemed taboo to the faithful. As Les Keyser puts it:

> In *The Last Temptation of Christ* Scorsese echoes traditional Christian dogma as he develops the themes of incarnation, atonement, and redemption. Scorsese, however, explores the concept of Christ's humanity more fully than most Christians, trying to fathom the essence of incarnation and to explore the psychological and theological implications of a deity made flesh, of a God in a man's body.[196]

Some of the shifts in Christian doctrine reflected here may even be attributed, partially and indirectly, to the influence of people such as Kazantzakis and Scorsese— lay believers and unbelievers, who in their faith and in their doubts challenged Christianity from the inside. Both may be considered, perhaps, as Middleton describes Kazantzakis, to be among "the many makers and remakers of Christian doctrine."[197]

[195] Middleton, "Christian Doctrine," 286.
[196] Keyser, *Scorsese*, 176–77.
[197] Middleton, "Christian Doctrine," 304.